

## **Environmental Challenges: the Community Response**

I am determined that the process of electing a new Labour team should be a positive and engaging period for our party, that the act of electing a new leader and deputy leader is the chance for political and organisational renewal and that we emerge in June or July stronger than before, and ready to take on the Tories. There is no task more important than uniting to defeat the Tories at the next election.

We only have one shot at this. It is a pivotal moment for our party and our country. It is vital that our leadership elections leave the British people with a strong sense that we are in touch with their concerns, on their side, and in tune with the majority of people. These elections must be about the future, and we must be the party of ambition and success, so people look at us and think we have the right approach to tackling the issues they care about.

Tackling climate change is a good example. This evening I want to address the reasons why I believe Labour's approach to tackling climate change, rooted in our collectivist values, is a stronger response than those of our political rivals, or those who are 'anti-politics', and rely on single issue campaigning.

I believe we are witnessing the confluence of important factors which give us the best chance for a generation to produce a tough and realistic response to the challenges of climate change.

The first factor is a recognition at the level of national governments that climate change is a real threat to the survival of the planet and the life on it.

A rise of between two and three degrees means:

- Melting glaciers will significantly reduce water supply to over a billion people

- Rising sea levels could lead to 200 million people being forced to migrate
- Declining crops yields will lead to famine and death especially across Africa.
- Millions more will die of malaria.
- Up to 40 per cent of the species on earth could face extinction

Our Labour Government has started to address the threat. Tony Blair called the Stern Report the most important report he had received in government.

We helped secure agreement on Kyoto. The UK Government put it top of our G8 and EU agenda. That is why the G8 + 5 dialogue began last year at Gleneagles is so important. It involves all the leading countries responsible for 70 per cent of emissions. It is vital to securing a binding framework of action after the Kyoto Protocol runs out in 2012.

Britain's central role as a member of the EU, the G8, NATO, and the Commonwealth gives us an important platform for our progressive politics. It is clear that Britain's emissions are dwarfed by those of India, China and the US. If Britain stopped emitting any greenhouse gasses at all, within two years they would be replaced just by China's growth in greenhouse gasses. Our greenhouse gasses account for just two per cent of the world's total. Here, our internationalist approach becomes vital if we are to make real progress.

The second factor is widespread citizen awareness, and a growing desire on the part of the individual to do something about the threat of climate change. This has moved on from a minority concern, espoused by a heroic but small band of environmental activists, to a broader concern in the population, especially young people and school students.

Increasingly, politics, local, national and international is being discussed through the prism of climate change. Just consider the debates about transport, energy policy, trade justice, or globalisation, and how the terms in which they are discussed have changed in the past five years.

We've built our governing strategy on the basis of economic efficiency being the flipside of social justice, and vice versa. Now, that formula has a new element: care for the environment. So – economic justice, environmental protection and economic efficiency form a new trinity to guide us in government.

Governments are taking action, including our own, and citizens are aware and want to play their part. But I would like to challenge the idea that these two factors taken together – national government action coupled with citizen awareness and engagement – are enough, and this brings me to the core of my argument to you this evening.

I think there is a missing ingredient, and that is a community-level response.

For me, there needs to be a collective response at the level of street, neighbourhood, estate and community if our action to tackle climate change is to be lasting and effective.

If you've ever heard me talk before, on anything and everything from neighbourhood policing to reform of the Labour Party, you'll know that I believe that communities have the initiative and common sense to solve most problems.

My pamphlet for the Fabian Society a couple of years ago *Communities in Control*, outlined my vision for community ownership, direction and control of local services, and a greater devolution of power away from central government, experts, planners and professionals, and into the hands of the people.

My socialism is not the socialism of the strong state and overarching, paternalistic social democracy of the 1940s and 1950s.

My socialism derives from community action, local protest, and working class movements rooted in self-help, DIY politics and bottom-up reform. It is the socialism of Keir Hardie who said:

‘socialism is not help from the outside in the form of state help – it is the people helping themselves acting through their own organisations, regulating their own affairs.’

Within British socialism is a rich tradition of co-ops and mutuals, friendly societies, craft and trade unions, women’s organisations, Guild Socialism, and local action groups. This localist strand is today more important than ever, especially when it comes to environmental action. We may not have coined the environmentalist slogan ‘think global, act local’ but it fits perfectly with this strand of local socialism.

I’ve never bought into the idea of ‘ordinary people’ because I’ve never met an ‘ordinary person.’ People are uniformly extraordinary, and capable of extraordinary accomplishments.

Every now and again in politics you meet someone who makes you think that you’re doing the right thing. That happened to me on in Manchester last month, when a community activist at a seminar called Annie Smith, a mother of six and a foster parent of six more, told the story of how she and other parents in Blackburn had chased the drugs dealers off their streets, reclaimed a derelict youth club and pub, and turned it over to use by the young people, cutting crime, nuisance and anti-social behaviour and creating a positive future for the young people.

Imagine how long it would have taken for a government committee to do that.

Even if it had occurred to them, imagine the feasibility studies, the environmental impact assessment, regulatory impact assessment, the multi-agency committee structure, the community consultation process, and the eventual submission to the Minister.

And all the while, the drugs dealers keep on pushing and the parents keep on fretting, and the youngsters keep on squandering their futures.

Hearing a story like Annie Smith's reminds me of the old anarchist slogan 'no answer but your own.'

So, we need a framework of funding and support in which community activism can thrive, and communities can take control, and nowhere is this more pressing than action on climate change.

I think there is a danger of the debate being seen through the lens of individual actions, such as changing your personal patterns of consumptions and social habits, or even dare I say sticking a wind turbine on your roof, and not enough about the local, collective responses that involve the 'we' and 'us', not just the 'me'.

This is why I would argue that the Conservatives do not have a credible response to climate change, because they do not believe in collective action of the kind that would make a difference. It is not just that Cameron's wind turbine was a PR stunt, (although I don't dismiss the importance of individual acts, if genuine). The problem is that he has no governing strategy to deal with climate change.

Cameron still remains pledged to scrap the Climate Change Levy which has been the central reason Britain has met its Kyoto targets. And his policy of disengagement from Europe and international isolation leave the Tories completely unable to broker the international agreements necessary to combat climate change. He says he backs renewable energy but along with other Tory MPs opposes the building of wind farms, describing them as 'giant bird blenders'.

This is why Labour's response is so much more credible, but of course there's more to be done. And it must be done at a collective community level. There's

a growing awareness of an individual's carbon footprint, but what about your community carbon footprint? This would engender a community awareness and response. Here, I would see local government as the leading agency, working alongside community groups and campaigns. I welcome the Local Government Association's Climate Change Commission, launched last month, which will specifically look at how communities can act together, and perhaps SERA should consider a submission?

I think more can be done to encourage community businesses which tackle climate change. There is a growing social enterprise sector, including mutuals and co-ops, and this can be the model for modern green businesses. We have increased jobs in cutting edge green industries from 170,000 in 2001 to over 400,000 today. I think of Trident Lighting in Salford who produce energy-saving lightbulbs. Or ENER-G, a firm in Salford which has just produced its thousandth combined heat and power (CHP) unit, and has contributed to the reduction of 20 million tonnes of CO2.

We must nail the myth that economic growth and environmental protection are mutually exclusive. Our own economy has grown by 25 per cent since 1997, and our greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 7 per cent.

There is a growing immediate market for environmental technologies, and we should use government grants and expertise to stimulate this sector.

A beefed up DTI with a stronger environmental focus would be capable of leading on this work. I would welcome a new Department for the Environment and Industry (DEI) to take the lead across Government.

Finally, as Party Chair, let me say how I think the Labour Party should respond. If ever there was an example where passing resolutions was an inadequate response to a challenge, it is climate change. I welcome SERA's work on planting forests, and Labour Students' campaigning to lead community clean-ups in parks. These examples must be followed across the movement.

But local parties must use environmental campaigning as the catalyst to turn themselves outwards to the community, make alliances with other progressive groups, and especially trade unions, to take practical action. On this issue, I believe we can re-engineer local Labour Parties away from bureaucracy and 'next business', and towards campaigning and community leadership.

Thank you for this opportunity to meet with you this evening. Climate change is without doubt the most pressing issue that we face, but I am convinced that the practical application of our socialist values can give us a framework of action, especially at the community level, that will work.

Thank you.